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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of deception and failure to obtain consent in educational research was studied. Articles in two journals that regularly publish educational research were examined. The journals were Volume 17 (1980) of the American Educational Research Journal and Volume 13 (198) of the Journal of Learning Disabilities. Only 54 articles listed in the research section of the table of contents in the Journal of Learning Disabilities were included in the survey. Each article was examined to determine four characteristics of the subject-researcher relationship: (1) subjects knowledge; (2) awareness of participation; (3) source of subjects; and (4) consent. A large majority of the subjects, 68.5%, were either elementary (K-9) or high school students. Almost all of these students attended public rather than private schools. The remaining subjects were college students (11.1%), school teachers (5.6%), school teachers and their students (7.4%), and a few that could not easily be categorized (7.4%) such as military trainees and Ph.D. biologists. Results indicated that subjects are seldom provided inaccurate information in educational research but that they may often not be aware that they are research participants. (Author/RL)

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DECEPTION IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the extent of deception in two journals that report educational research. It was found that subjects are seldom provided inaccurate information in educational research but that they may often not be aware that they are research participants. Empirical and ethical implications of these results are discussed.

Honesty in dealing with human subjects has long been a concern in behavioral research. It has been documented that as many as 18-19% of all published psychological studies may involve deception (Menges, 1973). There are several reasons that behavioral researchers are concerned about the deception of human subjects. The first reason is ethical. Deception makes it difficult for the researcher to obtain informed consent and informed consent is generally considered to be a requirement of ethical research (APA, 1973; Soble, 1978). Kelman (1967) suggested several negative consequences of deception in behavioral research. He expresses concern about the possibility of a subject's being harmed as a result of research participation, about the kind of use of human beings that the use of deception in some types of research implies, and that the institutionalization of deception may contribute toward the trend in our society to view man as an object to be manipulated. He goes on to state that deception should be used only if the problem is important and deception is essential to investigating the problem. Deception in behavioral research has also been objected to on the grounds that some experiments could lead to a loss of self-esteem or dignity by the subjects (Baumrind, 1964).

The second concern with deception is methodological. It has been argued that in some studies deception fails to create a realistic situation and that the results of the research can not be generalized (Baumrind, 1964). It has also been pointed out that many subjects are suspicious and that deception often fails (Adair, 1972; Stang, 1976). It should be pointed out that all of the subjects in these studies knew that they were research participants. In educational research it would be reasonable to hypothesize that many subjects are not aware that they are research subjects, but that they recognize that something out of the ordinary is happening and that this knowledge affects their behavior.

The purpose of this study was to determine the prevalence of deception and failure to obtain consent in educational research.

Method

The articles in two journals that regularly publish educational research were examined. The journals were Volume 17 (1980) of the American Educational Research Journal and Volume 13 (1980) of the Journal of Learning Disabilities. Only those articles listed in the research section of the table of contents in the Journal of Learning Disabilities were included in the survey. A total of 54 articles were surveyed.

Each article was examined to determine four characteristics of the subject-researcher relationship. The first was the type or amount of information that the researcher provided the subject. Each article was categorized using the following four categories: (1) complete information - the subjects were given complete information about the purposes of the study and about the variables under investigation, (2) incomplete information - the subjects were given some information or no information, but not complete information about the study, (3) inaccurate information - the subjects were given information which would deceive them about the purpose of the study or about the variables being investigated, and (4) indeterminate - it was not possible for studies in this category to tell what, if any, information about the research was provided the subjects.

The other three types of information gathered were the extent to which subjects were aware that they were participating in research, the source of the subjects by grade level, and whether informed consent was obtained from the subjects or their parents before the research was begun.

The reliability of the categorizations was established by rating a random sample of the articles a second time. Agreement between the two ratings was 97%.

Results

Subjects Knowledge

Subjects were provided complete information in research reported in 3.7% of the articles, incomplete information in research reported in 3.7% of the articles, and inaccurate information in the research reported in 3.7% of the articles. In 88.9% of the articles it was not possible to determine what, if any, information about the research was given to the subjects.

Awareness of Participation

In 33.3% of the surveyed articles subjects were aware that they were participating in a reasearch project while in only 1.9% of the articles were the subjects categorized as being unaware. In 64.8% of the articles it was not possible to determine whether the subjects were aware that they were participating in research. Although the extent to which these subjects were aware could not be determined, reading the studies left the impression that many, if not most of the subjects in the indeterminate category, were not aware that they were research subjects.

Source of Subjects

A large majority of the subjects, 68.5%, were either elementary (K-9) or high school students. Almost all of these students attended public rather than private schools. The remaining subjects were college students (11.1%), school teachers (5.6%), school teachers and their students (7.4%), and a few that could not easily be categorized (7.4%) such as military trainees and Ph.D. biologists.

Consent

Consent of some sort was obtained from either the subjects or their parents for the research reported in 36.7% of the articles. This figure was arrived at by inference and includes several cases where the authors did not specifically

report obtaining consent. For example, two studies involved medication or medical procedures, and federal guidelines would have required the consent of the subjects or their parents. In another study Ph.D. biologists responded to a survey and it was here assumed that responding amounted to consent.

There were no cases where consent clearly was not obtained, but in 79.6% of the articles it was not possible to determine whether consent was obtained or not. Considering the results reported above under the Awareness of Participation subsection, it seems likely that in many cases consent was not obtained.

Additionally, it should be mentioned that even where consent was obtained it may not have been to participate in research as subjects. In several cases it was not clear whether the subjects and their parents were consenting for the students to participate in research or agreeing to participate in a testing program.

Discussion and Conclusion

The most obvious conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that it is not possible to determine with any certainty the extent of deception in educational research by examining the research literature. This, in itself may be important, in that it may indicate a lack of sensitivity to the rights of students by the educational establishment. In spite of the lack of specific information in the articles on consent and deception several general conclusions do seem reasonable. First, it seems apparent that very little active deception takes place in educational research. It seems likely that most deception in educational research is the result of not providing the subjects information rather than providing them inaccurate information. A second conclusion would be, through inference from the high numbers of cases in the indeterminate categories, that a high proportion of subjects in educational research are not aware that they are participating as subjects in a research project.

If these conclusions are correct, and in fact many educational research subjects do not know that they are subjects and have not given consent, does this create empirical or ethical problems for education?

The answer to the first part of this question is probably negative. In psychology deception likely does create empirical or methodological problems. Psychology's methodological problems stem primarily from the mistrust or suspiciousness of the subjects (Kelman, 1967; Schultz, 1969; Stricker, Messick, and Jackson, 1969; Adair, 1972; Stang, 1976). This is understandable when it is noted that many subjects in psychological research are college students and that most college students learn quickly that psychologists decieve subjects. Additionally it should be mentioned that most subjects in psychological research are aware that they are subjects even if they are deceived about the experiment. Most subjects in educational research seem to be students in elementary (K-9) and high school. These students are likely less aware of the extent of deception in behavioral research than college students. Even if they are aware that psychological research has involved frequent deception of subjects this reputation has probably not generalized to educational research. Additionally, educational research subjects are generally deceived only in that they are not informed that they are participating in research, thus the only thing they would have to become suspicious of is whether or not they are in fact subjects in research. Although such suspicion could develop it seems unlikely that it often does. If it does it could have negative influences. It has been established that knowledge that one is a research subject can affect one's performance (Orne, 1969; Rosenberg, 1969; and Sigall, Aronson, and Van Hoose, 1970)

The second part of the question is more difficult and it does seem that deception and failure to obtain consent create ethical problems for education. Kelman's (1967) concerns about deception seem to apply to educational research as well as social psychology research. Although harm to a subject is unlikely,

it seems to demean the individual to use him to an end which he may or may not support without first getting his permission.

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